

Netflix, Witchcraft and Dabbawalas

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We Need More Witchcraft in Business

A New York Times International editorial piece on Witchcraft and the US Presidential election was not where I expected to find inspiration on how to explain MySupportBroker to people – but I did. Apparently, Hillary Clinton’s extreme critics during the election regularly referred to her as a witch, and a scroll through Twitter hashtag #WitchHillary revealed some people actually believed Mrs Clinton was practicing witchcraft. The Times quotes from an essay by journalist Jessa Crisp about Hillary Clinton and Victoria Woodhull, Victoria was the first woman to run for President and a practicing spiritualist. In the essay, Jessa argues that we could all do with more witchcraft in our politics and not less. She says witches have “faith in the balance between humans and the natural world, in the power of sexuality, in human equality and dignity, and in community over hierarchical power or authority” – a perfect elucidation of the cultural drivers of MySupportBroker. In my family, I am known for my witch-like qualities of sensing illness, herbal cures and feeling spirits so it came as no surprise to them when I told them about my understanding – in fact they questioned me as to how I had not seen that before! I must say I agree with Jessa about the need for more witchcraft and I would extend that out from politics into the business world, which is dominated by the pursuit of shareholder value and individual pursuit of wealth and status rather than desire to make the world a better place for us all.

But back to the MSB culture. We are driven by our form of in-house witchcraft which we call our Peer Principles of human to human interactions, mutuality, collaboration, helpfulness, equalising of power, self-help, choice, speaking up for yourself and others. To be part of MySupportBroker you need to have personal lived experience of disability or a physical or mental health condition. This is not unusual in our sector but what is different about the MSB peer definition is that it is much wider than conventionally applied. We do not see Peers only as people who share the same disability or conditions and who publicly identify as such, but rather as people with their own lived experience

gained through a range of life experiences, including loving and supporting someone who has a health condition. As a peer, you are naturally sensitised to the human experience we deal with every day, having a ready empathy which makes it easier to engage with our Peer Principles. So now, when some conventional business owner or a 'professional' looks at me with pity for what they perceive as my naïve commitment to a peer-to-peer social business I say "oh no, it is not naivety, it's witchcraft" – this makes for a far more interesting conversation!

Watch out the Peers are coming.....

MySupportBroker started off as an action research project undertaken by an energetic and inspired group of young disabled activists. They wanted to use the advent of personal budgets in the funding of social care in the UK to empower themselves and others to live the lives they chose rather than the lives professionals chose for them. As part of their research they found that there was no existing accredited formal training for Support Brokers at that time in the UK. They believed that was wrong, as customers deserved to have Peer Support Brokers who knew what they were doing. But just as importantly, they knew as 'peers' they needed accredited training to stand up to the 'professionals' they would be dealing with – both for their own self confidence but also as a mark of credibility to challenge professionalism as the dominant force in social care and health. So, they designed and developed our Peer Support Brokerage course based on the Peer Principles we use to this day. Our peer model is a direct move away from what I see as the over boundary ridden professionalism – a doing 'to' rather than 'with' culture in the care sector - and moves us instead to a consumer model where money is power and he who pays the piper calls the tune. Is the Uber driver a worse option because he is not a licenced taxi driver or is not wearing a uniform? Are professional stamps of more value or use than peer to peer ratings? In my view the term 'professional' when applied to public service is starting to look less like a highly-qualified expert and more obviously look like a form of social control. It now seems like the state funded care sector is one of the last bastions of social control, but change is coming fast as the 'I am the Professional so I know best' attitude is wearing thin while Uber options like MSB earn their spurs.

What have Netflix and MySupportBroker got in common?

As CEO I am often asked how MSB works in practice – this should be easy but a different business approach requires a different way of explaining how we do business. I have come to feel MySupportBroker has more in common with Netflix than it has with most health or social care business in the market. Netflix set out its HR approach in a popular document among Silicon Valley companies entitled: *Netflix Culture: Freedom and Responsibility*. Unusually for HR document it addresses its employees as if they are adults. It argues for hiring the best people you can, giving them freedom and responsibility, and rewarding them for the results and performance not the hours spent behind the desk: "sustained A-level performance, despite minimal effort is rewarded with more responsibility and pay". This is one of those documents I wish I had written, as it encapsulates what we do in MySupportBroker.

According to Netflix, as companies grow so does complexity and bureaucracy, driving out the best people and leading to even more bureaucracy to manage the incompetents who remain. They say the trick is to hire ever more self managing, high performing people and not cramp their style. You lay out a strategy, establish roles and objectives, and get out of the employee's way. You don't force them to go to meetings they don't need. You keep things ad hoc. And you certainly don't count vacation days. If you expect performance, you let your employees decide when and how much they want to work to achieve it.

Free the Workers, Man

In the MSB world, to be truly self managing is to be freelance as it immediately eradicates any semblance of a Master/Servant relationship that is the basis of employment contracts. The freelance nature of the Support Brokers mean they can powerfully represent their customer's needs to MSB HQ and beyond without being tied into corporate directives to do certain things, for example using a particular services provider over another because of a corporate tie-up. This is vital if we are to achieve our overarching mission to maximise our customer's choice and control over the support services they receive. It also means if MSB HQ doesn't work to properly support our Brokers they simply vote with their feet.

A lot of concerns are raised in the press about zero hour contracts, the growth of a casualised workforce, and the emerging gig economy of Uber, Deliveroo etc. In my view the analysis of this has been lazy, and when taken on a case-by-case basis where there are complaints it is about inadequate pay, uncertain work rates, insufficient control by the contractor and an absence of human contact between employer and contractor. Missing these issues risks missing the other side of freelance work. UpWork, the US freelancers' recruitment platform, and the Freelancers Union of America jointly undertook research of freelancers in 2016 and found:

- 55 million or 35% of US working population are freelancers.
- 63% started by choice not necessity.
- Biggest reason for Full time freelancers is freedom and choice, for Part timers it is additional income.
- 79% say it is better than traditional work.
- The majority are more likely to feel respected, engaged, empowered and excited to start each day than they did in conventional jobs.
- They also say they control their hours better and work less than 40 hours per week.
- And feel having diversified employers is more stable than a single employer.
- 50% said no amount of money could get them back to a traditional job.

This is the MSB picture of freelance work. Most importantly for us at MSB, our Brokers who have long term conditions themselves, or are providing support to loved ones, appreciate the flexibility freelancing provides to manage their conditions or the support they provide in a way that best suits them without having to hide anything in their workplace. From MSB's perspective it means we have a workforce that is ultra-flexible, and so naturally matches the needs of our customers to be seen in their own homes at times natural to them rather than being confined to the formal working week of conventional health and social care 'professionals'. A win-win for us all!

When recruiting wear a blindfold and let the bus driver decide

Back to the America where a West Coast business I admire states "We are more than a company, we are a Movement. We take our mission of *Improving lives through business* very seriously and we hope you will too". They believe that a "close-knit culture lets employees feel at home with one another, making for a supportive, authentic atmosphere". When they recruit, they ship people out to their funky campus by bus, with a 'quiet retainer' style bus driver. They give the applicants a whole day of group exercises, table football and free coffee and then ship them back by bus to the city. At the end of the day the interviewers put together their final list of recommended recruits but the final decision on who is employed is made by, yes you guessed it, the bus driver. Obvious but

brilliant – if you don’t respect the quiet retainer there ain’t no space for you in their business! I had my own ‘quiet retainer’ moment some years ago, as a very (too!) young, vaguely attractive Director of Older People’s Services in a large County Council. When the corporate secretaries went out for a birthday lunch or some such celebration I would cover the phones for them – I particularly loved wearing their funky new telephone answer Bluetooth headsets – small pleasures. A very smart and self-important man arrived early to meet with me in my Director role. He stated his business to me in my secretary role in a rude, off hand and self-important tone, and was mightily embarrassed when I explained I actually was the Director he was there to meet..... he wouldn’t have got the job either!

In MSB we have made our Support Brokerage training course our Bus Driver. We use it as a ‘Blind Recruitment’ process to achieve a highly diverse group of Peer Support Brokers across race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and disability. A conventional ‘Blind Recruitment’ process relies on removing any information from potential recruits’ application forms, or CV’s that may lead to an unconscious bias against them (e.g. name, ethnicity, health etc.). MSB’s ‘Blind Recruitment’ process is a result of word of mouth referrals so the people who come to us have already been screened by MSB brokers or customers combined with our offer of free accredited training. We don’t ask, or look at CV’s, rather we invite people to complete a personal support plan, allowing them to reflect on their own support needs and networks. Applicants have a telephone discussion, where they’re briefed on the rigours of the course, time commitment and study requirements. Applicants are then invited to join the training and they make their own decision. If they successfully complete the eLearning course they then jointly undertake two support plans with experienced Peer Brokers who have the final say on their employability – our bus drivers!

The result? 78% of whom are from black or minority ethnic groups, 75% have direct lived experience of physical or mental health conditions, 25% direct lived experience of supporting a loved one with support needs; 16% senior citizens; 49% male; 51% female.

Let’s hear it for the bus drivers.....

The best technologies are really hidden hands

Much is made of dotcom businesses – one click and the world is renewed. But Uber is nothing without its drivers, Deliveroo is nothing without its cyclists, AirBnB nothing without its houses and hosts, Match.com is nothing without its lovers. At their heart, all these dotcoms are people and their peer to peer interactions - the technology is the enabler, not the main show. MSB is the Uber of the health and care world, and our tech platform is the invisible hand driving the business. Our tech empowers the peer to peer connecting of our brokers and customers by automating all the tedious, time consuming practicalities of their collaboration leaving them free to focus on the real issue – how can customers live their best lives.

We build our own **technology** so we have a Support Brokerage digital platform that acts as invisible hands to deliver close, real-time, mobile working across all of us in the business that is completely virtual – our office is where our laptops are, and everyone knows all the time what everyone is doing, or perhaps most importantly not doing. Communication is always ‘on’ as we use Skype, WhatsApp etc.

Our platform connects a digitally enabled business where everyone is self-managing and has no need for a dense management or hierarchy, so we have a **flat peer based structure** of MSB HQ and our networks of freelance Support Brokers, Trainers and Assessors, Quality Assurers – that’s it. The conventional model of a Board is eschewed for a Peer Collaborative which holds MSB HQ to account

– HQ work for the Support Brokers who work for the customers to turn conventional governance on its head..

If MSB delivered meals this is how we would do it.....

India is inspiring on so many levels but I was unprepared for the impact the Bombay version of ‘meals on wheels’ had on me. Luckily, the MySupportBroker tech team is Indian – it is lucky for us as they are fantastic and lucky for me as I get to go there and work with them for a week each year. Morning coffee time at Western Station Bombay (“*Stop saying Mumbai Sinéad*” my local friends *chastise me* “*we still say Bombay*”) and I come across the Dabbawalas for the first time. I thought at MSB we had made good progress on being a highly efficient, low cost, peer to peer, personalised customer service with a flat structure and self-managing culture, but that was before I met the Dabbawalas.

The 5000 Dabbawalas deliver 200,000 lunches (dabbas) every week day and have been operating since 1890. They collect the homemade lunch from individual houses on the outskirts of Bombay in the morning and deliver to the intended family members in offices and schools for lunch time. They use public transport, bikes and wooden trollies. No GPS, no identifying bar codes or any form of technology but use colour codes on each dabba (lunch tin) as few of the Dabbawalas can read. They have an error rate of 1 in a million, but this is no ‘mass production’ approach – each meal is highly personalised as it is cooked at the person’s home to meet their individual religious observances, dietary requirements and personal taste. The Dabbawalas all belong to the one association with a flat structure. There are no bosses, instead there is a governing body, team leaders and all the Dabbawalas. They share the income equally among themselves. When a vacancy occurs the new Dabbawalas are recruited on a peer to peer basis from their sect. They each bring two bikes for their Dabbawala bike share, a wooden crate with wheels and money for their hat.....and for this the customers pay \$10 per month. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTkGDXRnR9I&sns=em>

Next up for MSB? A review of our structure, systems and processes through a Dabbawala lens!